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Abstract

Drawing on empirical data from Channel 4 (C4) regarding the broadcasting of violent war imagery, and positioned within Goffman's notion of the interaction ritual (1959, 1967), this article investigates how C4 negotiate potentially competing commercial, regulatory and moral requirements through processes of discretionary decision-making. Throughout, the article considers the extent to which these negotiations are presented through a series of 'imaginings' – of C4 and its audience – which serve to simultaneously guide and legitimate the decisions made. This manifestation of imaginings moves us beyond more blanket explanations of 'branding' and instead allows us to see the final programmes as the end product of a series of complex negotiations and interactions between C4 and those multiple external parties significant to the workings of their organization. The insights gleaned from this case study are important beyond the workings of C4 because they help elucidate how all institutions and organizations may view, organize and justify their practices (to both themselves and others) within the perceived constraints in which they operate.

Keywords

Broadcast journalism, Channel 4, deference, discretionary decision-making, Goffman, graphic imagery, imagined audiences, interaction ritual, regulation, war violence

In June 2003, both the BBC and Channel 4 (C4) broadcast documentaries about the Iraq War that included particularly graphic images of war violence. C4's *The War We Never Saw: The True Face of War* was produced to provide a 'shocking exposé of the reality of the Iraq War' (C4, 2003b). To this end, it utilized scenes from Al Jazeera footage to argue that British broadcast agencies often fail to report the true human cost of war. The same

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Pixellated BBC image



Unpixellated C4 image



Figure 1. Images from *Correspondent: Al Jazeera Exclusive* (BBC) and *The True Face of War* (C4)

scenes were also used in the BBC's *Correspondent* documentary *Al Jazeera: Exclusive* to highlight the ways in which Al Jazeera's reportage had treated casualties of war as 'morally equivalent' (BBC, 2003a). In particular, the BBC wanted to convey 'the way in which Al-Jazeera had broadcast graphic images to tell the story of the war' (2003a). Yet, despite the similar claims of exposé in both documentaries, the composition of the Al Jazeera footage varied considerably in each. The BBC showed each scene for a shorter period of time, typically two or three seconds less than C4. Shots that revealed particularly graphic images of injuries and dead bodies in the C4 documentary were excluded from the BBC's version. Further, the BBC pixellated the faces of the dead whilst C4 did not (see Figures 1 and 2). Cumulatively, these – and other – differences resulted in the C4 documentary being far more explicit in its inclusion of violent war imagery despite the fact that both programmes had similar remits, used the same raw material, and were (to a large extent) bound by the same regulatory codes regarding broadcasting images of war violence.¹ Of course, there are a number of ways that these differences might be explained, particularly in light of the consistent criticism leveled at the BBC regarding its programme decision-making. For the purposes of this article however, such a comparison highlights the extent to which broadcast organizations – like the BBC and C4 – attempt to produce differentiated programmes to reflect their distinct 'brands' (often with the purpose of attracting audiences and funding), and how, as a consequence, they may differently interpret and utilize the regulatory frameworks that govern their working practices.

This comparison then serves as a starting point for the forthcoming discussion which explores how C4 negotiate the regulatory, market and moral requirements regarding the production of programmes that include graphic war violence. This does not presume that these factors are incommensurate. Rather, by drawing on what Tester (2001) terms the 'competing logics of journalism' where true objective journalism can be undermined by the need to gain and retain audience ratings, this article investigates how C4 formally and informally present their rationalizations of the *potentially* competing demands between market demands and due deference to substantive moral issues concerning graphic war violence (as laid out in the regulatory documents). The article starts by introducing three

Pixellated BBC image



Unpixellated C4 image



Figure 2. Images from Correspondent: Al Jazeera Exclusive (BBC) and The True Face of War (C4)

particular frameworks that inform C4's decision-making processes: their identity and ethos, their 'imagined' audience and the regulatory codes. Then, drawing on Goffman's (1959, 1967) interaction ritual and 'rules of conduct', the discussion turns to how C4 present their decision-making as a process of negotiation between these frameworks but in a hierarchic manner where some are positioned above others, particularly the imagined audience and, by extension, revenue and commercial viability. Throughout, the article considers the extent to which these negotiations are presented through a series of 'imaginings', both of C4 and its audience, which serve to simultaneously guide and legitimate the decisions made. Such insights are important beyond the workings of C4 because they help elucidate how all institutions and organizations may view, organize and justify their practices (to both themselves and others) within the perceived constraints in which they operate.

Identity, ethos and the imagined audience

British broadcast agencies manage their 'brand' throughout all spheres of organizational activity but particularly through television programmes. The television programme is, in effect, the final product of identity management efforts and represents a channel's 'brand', ethos and distinctiveness. Programmes produced by C4 therefore need to be 'differentiated' in their content and style from, say, the BBC despite being bound by shared genre conventions or meaning structures that render programmes intelligible and meaningful to audiences (Dornfeld, 1998; Neale, 1990). For C4, this differentiation is fundamentally guided by their unique public service remit. Under the 2003 Communications Act (and the 2012 Digital Economy Act), this remit is a condition of C4's licence and stresses the need for C4 to demonstrate innovation, experiment, creativity and distinctiveness in the form and content of their programmes (Communications Act, 2003: 237; see also Ofcom, 2006).² This unique remit therefore simultaneously represents the means through which C4 seek to communicate the particular distinctive characteristics of their organization whilst also being expressive of C4's pledge to treat audiences in a particular way.

In order to be successful in this regard, C4 must conceive of a sense of audience(s) with whom they are communicating. One such audience is the regulators. Another is funders. But, perhaps the most significant audience is the viewing public because it is traditionally through sustained viewing that C4 will secure regulatory backing and advertising revenue. Whilst officially C4 claim their target audience are the young (16–34 year olds) and ‘up market’ (ABC1) (see C4, 2010), beyond this demographic breakdown they also suggest they have a particular ‘sense’ of their audience in terms of composition, distinctiveness and viewing preferences:

Our audience is highly educated on the whole, interested people who are interested in the news of the world. They are not just watching to get their daily news but tend to be more educated, retired, you know people who have an hour to spare in the evening. (C4 Producer; Interview data)

Yet, given the distanced relationship that broadcasters have with their audience, and the potentially vast and heterogeneous composition of the audience itself, it is inherently difficult for them to ascertain and generalize with any certainty who their audiences actually are, or what their preferences may be. Consequently, when C4 develop a sense of their audience what they are actually doing is constructing an ‘imagined audience’. This imagining is based on the limited information they have been able to gather through research,³ emails and audience complaints (see also Espinosa, 1982; Gill, 1993; Pekurny, 1982). The ‘imagined audience’ then becomes a construct that can be delivered to funders and regulators in order to justify and make more meaningful the production process of programming (Hine, 2001). The resulting programmes, as a dual determinant of C4’s remit and the imagined audience (in negotiation with each other) produce a differentiated ‘face’ for C4:

We assume that the C4 audience, broadly, is more likely to be interested in a more global news agenda than say the ITV audience. That means there are certain sorts of stories which you are more likely to see on C4 News than you are on ITV. (Editor, ITN News; Interview data)

In other words, whilst programmes are produced in accordance with what C4 perceive will appeal to the imagined audience, the content and form may be governed as much by the meaning that it will have for the C4 identity. Concurrently, programmes are also constrained by the regulatory codes as outlined by the regulatory body Ofcom (formerly ITC and BSC).

Broadcasting violence: Regulation and discretion

Prior to the implementation of Ofcom in 2003, the regulatory documents containing the legal codes relevant to independent broadcasters were located in the Independent Television Commission’s (ITC) Programme Code and the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC).⁴ This is relevant to the forthcoming discussion because it draws upon programmes produced in both the ITC and Ofcom period. With regards to the broadcasting of violence, the relevant codes were located under the terms ‘Taste and Decency’ (see BSC, 2002; ITC, 2001; also Shaw, 1999). Ofcom continued to employ the

ITC ‘Taste and Decency’ clauses (or rules) until 2009 when they replaced them with the less explicit clauses under ‘Harm and Offence’ (Ofcom, 2009a, 2011a). Some have suggested that this transition from ‘Taste and Decency’ to ‘Harm and Offence’ is reflective of a broader decline in censoriousness unsuitable for the 21st century (Frost, 2012), but for the purposes of this discussion it is noteworthy that the core principles (and broadcaster obligations) underpinning both sets of clauses remain the same. These are centred on four key (interrelated) concerns which for clarity are discussed here as avoiding offence, avoiding sanitization, avoiding harm and avoiding intrusion.

The offence avoidance obligation is perhaps the most significant of all the obligations, and reflects a perceived moral and cultural consensus – albeit fluid – in which both the audiences and broadcasters are situated. Consequently, both sets of regulatory clauses emphasize the need to avoid offending the audience *unnecessarily*, stressing that broadcasters must be able to ‘justify’ the inclusion of potentially offensive material. With regards to avoiding sanitization, the clauses stress that broadcasters are obligated to demonstrate a commitment to educate and inform audiences about the reality of violence in order to avoid sanitizing, condoning or glamorizing it (BSC, 2002; ITC, 2001; Ofcom, 2011a). It is with this in mind that the third obligation, termed here ‘avoiding harm’, can be understood. Potential harm caused by violence in programmes is expressed in a number of ways: the desensitization of viewers; the identification with violence on screen that may lead to an unreasonable fear of violence; the imitation of violence; and encouraging or inciting violence (BSC, 2002; ITC, 2001; Ofcom, 2009a, 2011a). Across all of these concerns (offence, sanitization and harm) the clauses stress the need to find a balance between creative freedom and responsibility to audiences, suggesting that this can be achieved through the programme context, the conventions of the watershed and the use of appropriate warnings. Lastly, ‘avoiding intrusion’ is concerned with the preservation of privacy, respect and dignity for both programme subjects and their relatives (BSC, 2002: 11; ITC, 2001: 17; Ofcom, 2009b: 11). These clauses are more pertinent to the information gathering and production stages where the subject, rather than the audience, is the main interlocutor.⁵ Notwithstanding the shift to greater self-regulation and the perceived variability of what constitutes offence, both ITC and Ofcom similarly emphasize the need for broadcasters to convey their respect for, and obligation to, audiences. In this sense, the ways in which broadcasters must negotiate observance of these principles remain relatively unchanged despite the ‘lighter touch’ of Ofcom.

Yet, within the confines of these regulations broadcasters have always been permitted a large degree of discretionary power, not least because the terminology employed in the regulatory documentation is equivocal. Hence, decision-making, whilst guided by regulation, takes place within a framework of choice. This is not to suggest it is unfettered or unconstrained, but rather operates within the confines of rules and law in accordance with Greenwalt’s definition of discretion (see also Dworkin, 1977; Emerson and Paley, 1992; Richardson et al., 1983):

Discretion exists if there is more than one decision that will be considered proper by those to whom the decision-maker is responsible, and whatever external standards may be applicable either cannot be discovered by the decision-maker or do not yield clear answers to the questions that must be decided. (Greenwalt, 1975: 368)

For Hawkins and Manning, discretionary decisions are shaped by the ways in which decision makers classify and interpret information according to the meanings it will have for them (Hawkins, 1992; 2002; Manning, 1992). This article suggests that such meanings may derive from the need for broadcasters to generate impressions of a distinct (and favourable) identity among their audiences, and it for this reason that programmes containing graphic war violence can vary considerably across agencies.

Negotiating face, decency and deference

With this in mind, the remainder of this article explores how C4's discretionary decision-making is framed, guided and rationalized by, and through, the three interdependent frameworks discussed above: the ethos and identity of the organization, their imagined audience, and the regulatory codes. There is a range of explanatory lenses that would help us interpret these processes, such as television branding and marketing rhetoric, particularly in relation to audiences (see Chalaby, 2005; Steemers, 2004), or notions of identity, performance and self-representation (see Butler, 1990; Hall, 1997). Here, however, Goffman's notion of the 'interaction ritual' and 'rules of conduct' (1959, 1967) are used specifically because they allow us to draw together various strands of thinking (performance, identity, branding, audience, notions of the self) in a manner that is coherent but pays due heed to the complexities of all the interdependent factors. By transferring Goffman's ideas about interpersonal relations to the level of organizations (particularly the dramaturgical perspective in which actors attempt to achieve influence and credibility), we can explore how C4 order, share and organize their actions through the interpretations and meanings they ascribe to their own, and others' actions (see also Garfinkel, 1967). If, as Goffman (1959: 24) argues, an individual must convince others that they are who, and what, they wish others want them to be, then these principles are a useful way to tease out how and why C4 may imagine (and project) a particular 'face' (or 'moral face') through graphic war programmes. Within this, Goffman's (1967: 48) notion of 'rules of conduct', which act as a guide for action regarding appropriate conduct, are a useful tool through which to think about how and why C4 negotiate their obligation of due deference to regulators and audiences within a commercially competitive environment. For Goffman, deference is defined as 'a component of activity that symbolically functions to convey to a recipient an appreciation for that recipient ... and through which an actor celebrates and confirms his relations to the recipient' (1967: 56). It is clear therefore that deference is directly related to identity building and impression management with, and for, significant 'others'. Thus, 'rules of conduct' and the associated notion of 'deference' offer us a particularly useful interpretive framework through which we can understand how C4 conceive their obligations to 'others', particularly audiences, regulators and funders, and how this relates to the meanings they attach to their own work and decision-making.

Of course, as suggested above, negotiating the balance between these factors is complex and they typically converge in discretionary decision-making processes. But for clarity the following discussion disaggregates them into three separate sections that resonate with the Goffmanesque perspective: face, decency and deference. The first discusses how, in the presentation of their discretionary decision-making, C4 emphasize

particular qualities of their ‘face’ (and its ability to appeal to the imagined audience) as a frame for decision-making. The second explores how this is negotiated with, and through, the regulatory codes, particularly those relating to avoiding harm. This discussion highlights how the frames of ‘face’ and ‘decent conduct’ become collapsed in the decision-making process in a manner that helps C4 circumvent legal and programme code infraction. The third explores the extent to which C4 attempt to generate and maintain a moral ‘face’ through deference to audiences but for purposes other than simply communicating their obligation to them, such as generating revenue. Throughout all these sections, what emerges from the ways C4 present (and represent) information about their decision-making is an implicit narrative that reinforces the ‘face’ of C4 as an organization with particular characteristics and ideologies that further legitimate their decision-making processes.

C4’s face: ‘Pushing the boundaries’

Among the range of factors that influence C4’s discretionary decisions regarding the style and content of programmes the one most often identified by respondents is C4’s unique remit. It is here that an identification with, and projection of the C4 ‘face’ is most clearly visible. Indeed, the consistency with which the remit is referenced suggests a collective and coherent management of C4’s identity that not only serves to represent C4 in particular ways, but also becomes a ‘self image’; a face through which C4 staff understand their organization. To this end, C4 respondents claim that programming decisions are made in accordance with their overarching commitment to produce ‘challenging and controversial contemporary subject matter’ (C4, 2006: 1), and to demonstrate innovation and experiment:

At times, Channel 4 will tackle subject matter that will provoke or that some viewers might find controversial or uncomfortable, but running through Channel 4’s content strategy is a commitment to meeting the four public purposes that we look forward to being enshrined in C4’s new remit. (C4, 2010: 1)

There is a very definite attitude, or take on a programme that C4 will take. It has to be different, innovative; it has to have a C4 angle. (Commissioning Editor for Documentary, C4; Interview data)

Our remit at C4 News is to get exclusives, to be challenging, to tell you what you don’t know. (C4 News Producer; Interview data)

Inclusive in this ‘challenging material’ is graphic war violence. Indeed, C4 broadcasters claim that their willingness to show more violence than other broadcasters is key to their promise to provide audiences with exclusive programmes. This was – and still is – discursively referred to as ‘pushing the boundaries of the code’, a phrase that encapsulates a belief that C4 discretionary decision makers can legally interpret the regulatory code in a manner that allows them to produce more explicit or controversial material. According to one respondent, the term ‘pushing the boundaries’ was originally employed by a member of the ITC regulatory board in response to an audience complaint about the broadcasting of graphic images from the war in Sierra Leone:

The ITC person said, 'I don't think that broadcasters are pushing at the boundaries of the code' – in other words, you know, we may self-censor to a greater degree when we show people about what happens in these parts of the world and we thought that was very interesting. (Commissioning Editor for Documentary, C4; Interview data)

Since 1999, the phrase 'pushing the boundaries' has transmuted into a concept that has been widely adopted by C4 to legitimate and guide decisions about the inclusion of graphic violence. Indeed, as one respondent claimed, it was with reference to 'pushing the boundaries' that C4 proceeded with the decision to broadcast the Sierra Leone footage in the documentary *Out of Africa in 2000*:⁶

This footage was not being shown on prime time television because of its brutal nature. We subsequently looked at the footage and thought we should go for it because it was clear that the nature of the footage itself raised a lot of questions about what can ever be shown on prime time television. (Commissioning Editor for Documentary, C4; Interview data)

The above quote is also suggestive of the extent to which this type of footage provides C4 with opportunities to produce programmes that are distinct and through which they could generate impressions of their agency as exclusive and controversial. In fact, the phrase 'pushing the boundaries' – and the qualities it embodies – was repeatedly used by respondents throughout this research to symbolize the C4 'face'. As the Commissioning Editor for Documentary for *Out of Africa* highlighted:

We exist here to be different and to be controversial you know. We are compelled to operate in this way by our remit, but that actually happens to be the way in which we want to operate anyway. We came into being to produce programmes that are different to the BBC and ITV and therefore in Foreign Affairs our aim is not just going to be to do a correspondent type piece or a rather factual piece that sometimes take a more predictable line. We exist to say these things and to do the programming that is different and so we were absolutely delighted with Sorious' footage, that's what we are here for basically. (Commissioning Editor for Documentary, C4; Interview data)

It is therefore through the 'pushing of boundaries' that C4 venture to generate an image of C4 as 'brave' and 'shocking'. Whilst they concede that at times this may offend audience sensibilities, they argue it provides audiences with a unique and distinctive television experience (see C4, 2006). Indeed, *The True Face of War* was hailed as an exemplar of this approach:

The True Face of War was one of the most memorable of many outstanding documentaries. The qualities which informed our response to Iraq – independence, originality, a willingness to go further than other broadcasters – were visible in many of our programmes. (C4, 2003a)

It is here that the 'imagined' audience becomes employed in conjunction with the 'pushing of boundaries' to guide and/or legitimate the decision-making process. This is particularly manifest in C4's repeated claims regarding the expectations and desires of their audiences that resonate with the 'pushing of boundaries': '... viewers think of C4 as brave – prepared to push boundaries, taking nothing for granted, prepared to shock' (C4,

2003a: 8). In this collapse of core values and the imagined audience that C4 present themselves as committed to a self image or 'face' that is fixed and worthy in its own right, whilst also suggesting this 'face' is oriented towards, and adaptable to, perceived audience expectation. Both of course help legitimate decisions regarding graphic war violence whilst generating impressions of C4 as unique and distinct. But to what extent, as others have suggested (see Born, 2002, 2003), are C4 using this 'face' as a rhetorical device to position themselves as 'alternative' in a more corporate climate? In other words, to what extent do they become what they believe others may want them to be in their presentations of decision-making and how is this negotiated alongside the regulatory codes that govern their practices?

C4 decency: Educating about the realities of war violence

According to C4, the pledge to educate audiences is a critical element of their unique remit.⁷ This, in part, enables C4 decision makers to rationalize and substantiate the inclusion of graphic war violence in two key interdependent ways. First, on the basis that it adheres to the C4 'face' to educate audiences about the reality of war violence through the 'pushing of boundaries'. Second, because both educating and the 'pushing of boundaries' can be situated within the regulatory requirement to avoid harm. For example, C4 defended their decision to include graphic scenes in *Out of Africa* on the grounds that excluding these scenes would have given audiences a misleading impression as to the real consequences of war and war violence.⁸ When scenes from the same footage were included in a C4 News report in October 1999, they were positioned within questions regarding the extent to which television broadcasters may be in danger of sanitizing war by rarely broadcasting this type of footage. The notion of avoiding the sanitizing of war is therefore presented as affording C4 some leverage regarding the inclusion of graphic war violence. Indeed, according to one C4 correspondent, the broadcasting of *The True Face of War* was a deliberate attempt by C4 to counter the otherwise 'glamourised' coverage of war:⁹

There is not enough focus on the butchery and the truth and the abattoir kind of reality of war, even modern war. And if you get into that world where you self-censor all the bad bits and you get huge and wonderful access to the story the military want to tell which is technology, then you've got glamour. War isn't glamorous. It's dirty, it's boring, it's scary, it's dangerous, it's banal. Yeah it's heroic occasionally but it is not the fucking Farnborough Air Show you know? C4 set out specifically to counter that this time with *The War We Never Saw*. (C4 Correspondent; Interview Data)

Thus, by conflating the regulatory codes and the 'pushing of boundaries', C4 are able to assert that their inclusion of explicit violence adheres to the legal requirements in unique ways by virtue of C4's unique 'face'. This collapse becomes critical to the negotiation process. This is not just because of the legal weight of the rules, but because, in the maintenance of the rule, C4 becomes committed to, and projects, a particular image of their organization as one which would naturally avoid either sanitizing or glamorizing violence (see Goffman, 1967: 50). In the decision-making process then, the face acts as a guide for interpretation of the rule as much as the rule acts to guide decisions that will help maintain the C4 face.

All of this, however, is simultaneously negotiated, rationalized and validated through the 'imagined' audience, particularly with regard to requirements from Ofcom that ask broadcasters to take account of the likely audience composition in their decision-making. Thus, in response to audience complaints, C4 can (and have) defend(ed) their inclusion of graphic war violence on the grounds that they consider the 'time of transmission and nature of the likely audience'.¹⁰ In addition, however, C4 claim that their (imagined) audience comprise those who wish to know, or see, the realities of war violence. This is particularly palpable in the following quote from the ITN News Editor regarding the decision to broadcast graphic footage of the Serbian bombing of the Sarajevo bread queue in the C4 News in 1995:

We ran a very bloody version of the Sarajevo bread queue when the Serbs bombed the market square. A lot of people were killed. It was terrible. There was blood all over the street and there were people in terrible distress and there were people who had lost limbs. It was hell. We decided to show it because it happened and people had a right to know what those mortar bombs had done ... Adults who want to know what is going on in the world should not be prevented from seeing the full horror of some of these incidents. (News Editor, ITN; Interview data)

Thus, the perceived aspirations of C4's particular imagined audience and the educating C4 'face' become intertwined in the logic and rationale of the decisions made. One frame informs and substantiates the other.

Our viewers recognize that what we do means occasionally offending sensibilities, or just getting it wrong, but they see that as a risk worth taking because, when it works, the rewards are high. It works for us, too. (C4, 2003a)

In accordance with notions of due deference, this imagining and positioning tells us something about how C4 interprets and utilizes the audience in their decision-making processes. Their relationship with their audience becomes celebrated and confirmed (see Goffman, 1967) but in a manner that serves a particular purpose. It not only acts as a potential guide for decision-making but also becomes a tool to legitimate explicit content in programmes. Indeed, for some respondents the particular composition of their (imagined) audience (especially the C4 News audience) allows them greater flexibility than other broadcasters regarding adherence to the regulatory codes:

C4 News is a programme for adults. It's before the watershed, the watershed does apply to it of course, but it is a programme for adults. It's a serious news programmes and it is done with integrity and you can show quite strong material even though it is at 7pm. (News Editor, ITN; Interview data)

Of course, employing the imagined audience in this way may not be sufficient to avoid infraction of the Ofcom code, nor does it guarantee that audiences will not be offended. Consequently, when C4 utilizes the imagined audience in the presentation of their decision-making what they are actually doing is presenting those factors that they believe balance out the tensions apparent in their decision-making rationale – or believe will be most convincing. These presentations are usually retrospective by virtue of C4 having to

respond to complaints. In anticipation of this, however, C4 also employ what are termed here deferential presentations. For Goffman, deferential presentations articulate an appreciation of a recipient through specific attestations concerning how they are regarded and will be treated in advance (see Goffman, 1967: 71–73).¹¹ Here, deferential presentations take the form of the programme's 'context', and the conventions of the 'watershed' and 'warnings' that warn audiences, in advance, about forthcoming violence so they can make an informed choice about watching (Ofcom, 2009a, 2011a). Deferential presentations become key to the ways C4 negotiate the balance between including graphic war violence and avoiding offence (or legal infraction). Whilst all broadcast agencies incorporate deferential presentations, C4 tend to include more warnings and explanation because the material itself is typically more explicit:

When C4 News showed the bread queue in Sarajevo, my Editor made what I thought was a special effort to push the boat out a bit further at 7pm ... and we put a few more warnings than we would do normally and spaced those warnings out. (C4 Correspondent; Interview data)

Look, we appreciate that with news programmes children might be watching. We do it with as many warnings as we can and then show people what goes on. I think we are grown up to see this sort of stuff. If anybody then has a child watching with those types of warnings, well they are a shit parent and they are a lot more danger to their kids than television is. (C4 Correspondent; Interview data)

This use of presentations has a dual purpose. Whilst they can be used pro-actively to avoid offence, they can also be used retrospectively to legitimate decision-making. For example, in response to a complaint regarding a news report, C4 maintained that despite it being broadcast prior to the watershed, it included sufficient warnings to alert viewers to the content.¹² As an ITN News Editor stated with regard to the Sarajevo bread queue footage: 'We had very few complaints because we explained why we were doing it.' The use of deferential presentations therefore becomes key to negotiating the balance between adhering to the regulatory codes, reinforcing C4's (educating) 'face' and performing appropriate deference to the audience. What is noteworthy throughout all these presentations is the centrality of the imagined audience as both a construct that can be delivered to the regulators and a dominating frame for decision making. It is to this issue of the audience that we now turn.

C4 deference: The moral face

If C4 is to generate impressions of itself as an agency that is committed to conducting itself in a suitably responsible and moral manner, it must incorporate an appropriate display of deference through which to convey *to* audiences a regard *for* audiences. It is here that expressions of deference to audiences (to avoid offence) become most explicit as a frame for C4 decision-making processes:

We were already showing more brutality than is common. Would it have been a sensible judgment to go right to the far extreme and show the full spectrum? I would have thought not actually because viewers might have thought it was voyeuristic. (Commissioning Editor for Documentary, C4; Interview data)

You are aware of the viewer, you don't want to upset the viewer. You don't want to show a shot more than you need to, you don't want to show a relative crying more than you need to. (C4 News Producer; Interview data)

Essentially, expressions of due deference to audiences become important to the maintenance of the C4's 'moral face' aside of the legal implications because they help to sustain an image of C4 as one that is dually moral and ethical. But to what extent are the frames of decision-making governed by perceived audience responses or the actual consideration of moral matters (such as voyeurism or subject distress)? It is important to note here that C4 acts as a mediator between subject and audience and therefore is obligated to perform deferential avoidance *on behalf of* the audience, and *for* the audience. But, perhaps because of this, and as suggested in the above quote, expressions of deference that protect audiences from feeling they are voyeurs of others' distress may be more important as a frame for decision-making than the actual protection of subjects at the information-gathering stage. This is important in light of the regulatory obligations that state broadcasters should not add to the distress of subjects or intrude on their privacy in an unwarranted fashion. Critically however, decisions related to information gathering and editing are rarely visible in the programme itself and hence there may be occasions when this obligation is compromised (or unobserved). Indeed, the following quote from the private diary of a C4 correspondent raises questions regarding the extent to which broadcasters may be – unwittingly or not – contravening the regulatory codes regarding privacy and distress:

Day three was much the same again; bus tour to another hospital where there were about 40 lightly injured men that we saw ... Once again, the undignified rush and scramble of the press mob made one want to find an alternative job. It's so demeaning for the people being pawed over and questioned to within an inch of their lives, before the flurry subsides and flows away to another hapless victim. (Diary of C4 correspondent during Iraq War)

Notwithstanding the tone of the above quote which suggests a distancing from the 'undignified' behaviour described, it does hint at the extent to which C4 – or indeed any broadcaster – may be compromised (or indeed compromise themselves) in their adherence to the wider 'moral' considerations that due deference requires at all stages of the production process. This is not to suggest that C4 have little regard for victims or that they engage in 'immoral' activities. Rather, it is to highlight that in the presentation of decision-making processes C4 appear to prioritize the *performance* of deference to audiences (whether grounded in due deference or not) as a frame, perhaps because it is so vital to the moral 'face' of C4. In short, and in accordance with Goffman's (1959: 251) notion of the manipulative self, C4 may need to generate a convincing impression of being deferential to audiences above and beyond other factors.

It is here that the centrality of the audience as a meaningful frame for decision-making becomes important. We can think of this in accordance with Mead (1967) and Blumer's (1969) notion of the self wherein one becomes an object of their own action, placing themselves in the position of others – in this case audiences, regulators and funders – and viewing themselves from that perspective in order to direct their actions. In the process of considering potential responses to one's actions, it becomes particularly important to

take account of those upon whom one is dependent (see Mead, 1967: 158). For C4 this appears to be their imagined audience (and their imagined responses) which subsequently act as a frame to guide decision-making. Perhaps the primary reason for this (and indeed their dependence on the audience) is because the audience, by extension, is considered to increase C4's commercial viability:

Our reputation gives us an exceptionally strong profile with the two sections of the audience advertisers most want to reach – young adults (usually defined as 16–34 year olds) and the higher income ABC1s. ... This attractive advertising profile, in turn, allows C4 to earn a disproportionate share of the total television advertising revenue available in the UK, enabling us to fund risk-taking and high value programmes ... That comes from building a close relationship with our audience, finding out what they want from us that they feel they do not get from other channels. (C4, 2003a)

Indeed, the perceived relationship between audience ratings and advertising revenue is particularly explicit in the following quotes regarding the ITN contract to supply C4 News:

If our audiences are low they [C4] will think 'well we are not getting advertising money' so they will go elsewhere. C4 has to have a news programme but it doesn't have to be with ITN. (C4 News Correspondent; Interview data)

We want to keep the audience on side because we want the biggest audience possible, we want the ratings to be high. If your ratings are low C4 will go elsewhere for the contract. (C4 News Producer; Interview data)

This collapse of the audience and revenue as frames of meaning is apparent throughout much of C4's articulations about their decision-making but, crucially, in a manner that complicates (and at times compromises) their positioning of deference in the same processes. For example, whilst C4 predominantly claim that they include graphic violence to appeal to the perceived expectations of the audience, the following quotes suggest that they are cognizant that the (same) audience may be so offended by (the same) violence that they subsequently 'switch off':

You don't want to get the point that you are showing disembodied corpses or horribly mangled people. It upsets the audience, the audience can't cope with what they are seeing and therefore switch off. (News Editor, ITN News; Interview data)

Articulations like this appear to run contrary to other C4 presentations that legitimate the inclusion of graphic violence. Indeed, inherent in the above quote is almost a sanitization of violence to avoid audience offence. When 'switching off' then becomes combined with understandings of ratings and commercial viability, notions of due deference – or the decisions behind a performance of deference – appear to be more economically driven than otherwise suggested:

You are constantly aware of the audience but you have to keep your reputation and if you want C4 News to be highly regarded, which it is, you have to treat your viewers with consideration, I mean they are your breadline. (C4 News Producer; Interview data)

If, as Born (2002, 2003) argues, the relationship between C4's core commercialism and actual practice remains unclear then perhaps it is here that competing logics of moral obligation and market demands may be occurring. On the one hand, deference to audiences is imperative if C4 is to sustain its audience share by avoiding audience offence. On the other hand, they are significantly aware that their products need to be differentiated in order to attract audience viewing, and by extension, funders. Interestingly, within this framework, graphically violent war programmes become positioned as one of a number of distinctly C4 outputs that may assist in gaining audience ratings *precisely* because of the explicit content:

Occasionally we want a bit of *The War We Never Saw* with a channel prepared to say 'look this is the programme', have warnings right left and centre. 'Cos you'll get more and more people watching it, let's be cynical but realistic about this. (C4 Correspondent; Interview data)

People surf, you know, and if they don't like you they will turn you off. They don't make an appointment to view factual programmes in the way that they do entertainment so you have to fight back. You can't make current affairs like I might have done a long time ago where you might put a lot of information out about Sierra Leone because it was good for people to know ... You've got to make programmes that people want to watch ... it's got to be watchable, it's got to be entertaining, it can't just be worthy. (Commissioning Editor for Documentary, C4; Interview data)

At some level then the frames for decision-making are contradictory, particularly with regard to the audience who are simultaneously 'imagined' from opposing positions, as those who may be offended, as those who wish to be educated, and as those who wish to be entertained by graphic war violence. This raises questions regarding the ways in which C4 interpret and present the decision-making processes they engage in. It suggests that formally, and through formal processes (such as regulatory responses), C4 may explain, rationalize and legitimate their working practices through particular positions, including due deference, their educational remit and, of course, the 'moral face' of C4. Yet, simultaneously they compromise these positions by suggesting different frames of reference such as economic drivers and 'performances' of (rather than actual) deference. The resulting 'face' of C4 becomes tangible in graphically violent war programmes – which was the starting point of this article. But the extent to which these programmes reflect what and who C4 are, or, what they believe others to want them to be, remains unclear.

Conclusion

The tension between journalism and free market economics has long been recognized. Drawing upon what Tester (2001) terms the 'competing logics of journalism', this article has explored these tensions through C4's broadcasting of graphically violent war programmes. In particular, it investigated the extent to which these programmes – and the production decisions behind them – embody the potentially competing logics of market demands and moral obligation (as articulated in the regulatory documents) and the means

by which C4 interpret, rationalize and legitimate their discretionary decision-making around these tensions. By utilizing Goffman's (1959, 1967) notion of the interaction ritual and rules of conduct and transposing them to the level of organizations like C4, this article has suggested that critical to the decision-making processes of C4 is an imagining of both themselves and their audience. Thus, whilst their decision-making is driven by both logics, it is primarily through reference to their 'face' (in terms of who they think they are and what they believe others want them to be) and in particular their 'moral face' that decision-making is both guided and legitimated. Because this is primarily articulated through formal procedures of accountability to the regulators and audiences, the notion of deference becomes central to the articulations; deference to the audience and deference to the substantive moral issues regarding graphic war violence. Yet, in this use of deference (as both a guide and legitimating tool), C4 are doing more than simply demonstrating adherence to the law and to the Ofcom code, they are also communicating (and substantiating) their 'moral face' through which they can attract credibility and advertising revenue.

Central to these processes then are 'imaginings'. They act as a frame through which C4 make sense of, and reinforce, their differentiated 'face' in a competitive market place where audience share is critical to sustained existence. The imagined audience becomes a construct that can be delivered to regulators (and funders) in order to make meaningful the processes of decision-making and programme production. Similarly, the imagining of C4 as an organization with particular characteristics and ideologies, evident in the presentation and representation of information about their decision-making, guides and reinforces the decision-making processes. Put simply, in the process of negotiating commercial, regulatory and moral requirements, C4 utilize their own 'imagining' of the C4 'face' as a guiding tool, a legitimization tool and marketing strategy (see also Johnson, 2007). Moreover, it is here, in the imagining of C4, that decisions appear to be most guided by the interpretations and meanings (and implications) that they will have for the organization, particularly within a competitive commercial sphere. This is important because within C4's articulations are wider principles of sense making, rationalization and, most importantly, legitimization that occur within all institutions and organizations. Thus, the ways in which C4 formally attribute particular characteristics to themselves (and their decision-making) tell us something about the public and private workings of other, perhaps more political institutions (see Maltby, 2012). Similarly, the notion of 'imaginings', and the ways in which these emerge through the processes of rationalization and negotiation tell us something about how organizations attribute meaning to their own actions that may subsequently become ritualized in tangible outputs and formalized processes.

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Notes

- 1 In addition to the regulatory documents of Ofcom (previously ITC and BSC), the BBC were also bound by the BBC's own internal *Producers Guidelines* (2003b) drawn from the BSC Code on Standards.

- 2 Among their principal duties Ofcom promote competition among broadcast agencies (Ofcom, 2006).
- 3 Channel 4 utilize various means through which to gather information about the audience including BARB (the Broadcasters Audience Research Board who provide the official industry measurement of UK audiences for broadcasting and advertising); Ipsos MORI (commissioned to track audience perceptions of Channel 4 against various themes including 'reputations'); Attentional (a research agency commissioned to analyse new or one-off programmes); Kantar Media (who conduct online audience research); and Ofcom (C4, 2011).
- 4 Prior to Ofcom producing their own documentation, independent broadcasters referred to the ITC *Programme Code* (2001). The BSC's *Codes of Guidance* (2002) provide guidance for BBC channels whilst additionally offering general guidance for all channels. In addition to the *Programme Code*, independent channels also produced their own guidelines reflecting the general principles of the ITC *Programme Code* and BSC *Codes on Standards*. For example, C4 had their own *Compliance Manual* governing editorial standards and the BBC produced a code of ethics known as the *Producers Guidelines* (2003b) and specific guidelines for producing war news.
- 5 These codes are located within sections entitled 'Reporting Suffering and Distress' (BSC, 2002), 'Privacy, fairness and gathering of information' (ITC, 2001) and 'Privacy' (Ofcom, 2009b, 2011b).
- 6 C4 *Out of Africa*, 13 January 2000.
- 7 Source: <http://www.channel4.com/about4/overview.html> (downloaded April 2006).
- 8 Source: Internal Memorandum at C4 regarding C4's response to a British Broadcasting Standards Commission complaint made by an audience member regarding the violent imagery of *Out of Africa*. Dated 11 January 2000. Sourced from staff at C4.
- 9 It is noteworthy that whilst *The True Face of War* set out to expose this 'reality', it only did so two months after major combat operations had ended as a retrospective documentary piece. C4 did not incorporate this footage in their coverage of the war as it unfolded in either news or documentary.
- 10 Source: Response by C4 Television Corporation to Complaints by J. Coate and F. and C. Head to the Broadcasting Standards Commission re: C4 News. TX: 19 October 1999 at 19.00 hours. Sourced from staff at C4.
- 11 Goffman uses the term 'ritual' in his analysis of these forms of deference, by which he means an 'Activity that represents the ways in which one guards and designs the symbolic implications of their acts' (1967: 57). However, the degree to which these forms of deference are ritualistic in the broadcasting performance is debatable. On the one hand, they are formalized codes that are fairly established in both regulatory documentation and broadcasting practice, and are symbolic of substantive moral concerns. On the other hand, they are not ceremonial, nor are they precisely described with regard to deferential performance. As such, the term ritual has not been used here although the symbolic implications of the performance of deference remain relevant.
- 12 Source: Finding from the Broadcasting Standards Commission regarding C4 News, 19 October 1999, 19.00 hours. Sourced from staff at C4.

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